Edward Faragher outside his home in Cregneash.

‘These days people are getting enlightened’: Edward Faragher and Manx fairy beliefs

Stephen Miller

Edward Faragher (1831-1908) was a Manx-English-speaking fisherman from Cregneash, a village on the Howe in the south of the Isle of Man.[1] Known in Manx as Ned Beg Hom Ruy, Faragher was the author of a collection of notebooks which detail Manx folklore. Four extant notebooks, one dating from 1897, two from 1898, and the last one from 1901,[2] provide valuable information about Manx folklore, language and customs. Part of the great recording and codifying of British folklore which took place from the second half of the 19th century into the early years of the 20th century, Faragher’s work describes a rich cultural heritage but one which, by the time he began his notebooks, was already on the wane. What is notable about Faragher’s work is that as well as recording a dying belief system, he also provided explanations and analysis to account for the decline in folk belief. The reasons – including economic factors and climate change – are striking in their modernity. There is a double vision in Faragher’s work: a loss of belief in fairies and fairy lore, and also a withdrawal of the fairies from the gaze of the mortal world.

Faragher’s investigations were encouraged by Karl Roeder (1848-1911), a German national and long-term resident in Manchester with an interest in Manx folklore, who had earlier befriended Faragher.[3] Roeder urged Faragher to collect folklore for him, sending Faragher blank notebooks in which to record what he could find, as well as engaging in a lengthy correspondence that ended only with Faragher’s death. Faragher the collector, fluent in Manx and English, written as well as spoken, was an insider in his own vernacular expressive culture, and he possessed a singular voice, reflective and knowledgeable, with much to say about the fairies and a wide range of folkloric items.

The notebooks reveal the range of Faragher’s interests and the sheer volume of material collected. In the 1897 notebook, Faragher filled 100 pages: the first 71 concern folklore, the remaining ones (to page 97) contain examples of his poetry, and the concluding four pages are an endnote addressed to Roeder. The second extant notebook, one of the two from 1898, also follows this pattern, with folklore material on pages 1-53 and 65-88 (with poems in the middle as well as at the end). The third notebook, also dating from 1898, is concerned with place names, specifically the coastal and rock names on the Howe.

A letter from 1896 lists the fieldnames for Cregneash itself. Faragher wrote to Roeder that '[t]heir are some more field names but I know not what the mean in manx or english I sopose the were christened by the fairies'.[4] The fourth notebook, from 1901, has a different format, with Roeder posing questions on the first nine pages for Faragher to answer and leaving the remaining pages blank, of which some 66 were filled (there is no poetry in this notebook). These notebooks together contain well over two hundred pages' worth of material. This is besides the letters sent to Roeder that also contain fairy lore.[5]

Faragher's research was the basis for the 'Notes and Queries' column which ran in the *Isle of Man Examiner* from 1901-3. This was a venture of Roeder's but the expected contributions from readers failed to appear and the material was mostly provided by Roeder himself.[6] A considerable amount of folklore appears in the columns and much of that matter was clearly drawn from Faragher's notebooks. A comparison of the columns and the notebooks demonstrates this; the columns also reveal there are missing notebooks and thus Faragher's researches extend beyond the 200-plus extant pages. However, the lack of engagement with Roeder's project does suggest a lack of interest and also, perhaps, an absence or loss of those with knowledge of Manx folklore. There is an elegiac quality to Faragher's research, a sense of the passing of this folkloric tradition which can also be found in the work of William Cashen (1838-1912), the only other insider voice from the Island in this period. Cashen wrote: 'Standing on the borderline between the going out of the Manx and the coming in of the English I have thought it advisable to save all that is possible of the customs, legends, superstitions, and folklore of the Isle of Man'.[7] The decline of local customs is thus connected to the decline of Manx in the face of an encroaching, and increasingly homogenised, English language. This idea of preserving regional dialects, national languages and local customs is found in the endeavours of the various dialect and language societies and projects which appeared during the second half of the 19th century; that instinct to preserve and record beliefs, practices and languages that appeared to be in danger of extinction also underpins the work of the folklore societies which were also a product of the intellectual culture of the latter half of the 19th century. We find language and fairy belief combined in Faragher's work as some of the fairies spoke Manx:

> The woman that keeps the shop in C[regneash] was telling me this morning that she heard the fairies in the garden again but [could] not understand their language very likely they are speaking the manx language yet and there is very few can understand them I never heard them talking mysel I spose they would not like me to hear them for I might understand them if they speak manx and might expose them.[8]

What is notable here is that the shopkeeper cannot speak Manx and is thus excluded from the fairies and their lore beyond what she can see. Faragher, as a Manx speaker, is privy to the otherwise secret world of the fairies and is thus excluded by the fairies themselves. Manx becomes a means of the fairies separating themselves.

Not all the fairies speak Manx, but their language is still unknown and thus the fairy world remains secret: 'I am told they are heard often but I dont hear of any one that can understand their language I sopose it will be the language of fairy land and whither that land is under the earth or above it nobody knows and nobody can tell.[9] Fairies from outside of the Island were also to be encountered. A man coming home on Christmas Eve to his cottage at Perwick 'heard great talking at the house when he came near but could not understand one word of them so it must have been some foreign fairies that could not speak manx'.[10]

Comprehensible or not, the sound of fairies speaking was one sign of their presence. Faragher records one of his neighbours telling him 'about hearing the fairies very often but very seldom getting a peep at them'.[11] But this period of decline which Faragher records is marked by increasing silence and the rarity in sighting of fairies: 'it seems the ghosts are like the fairies and dont like to shew themselves as they did formerly'.[12] What we can suggest here is that 'sightings', or accrediting happenings to ghosts and fairies, declines as part of the encroaching of English, and associated new ideas and beliefs which challenge traditional attitudes. We may also speculate as to the impact of deaths of older Manx speakers on Manx folklore as a living tradition. The fairy becomes connected to ghosts – things to be disbelieved. However, as part of a repeated pattern of both suggesting people no longer believe in fairies and offering explanations for the disappearance of fairies and associated figures, Faragher provides an argument for the vanishing of ghosts. The spirits of those murdered were now fewer due to increased detection of those responsible: 'the boganes are all gone away as there is no murders in the Island now that the murderers ha[ve] been found out and punished'.[13]

It may be significant that Faragher had little personal contact with fairies. This creates a distance, giving Faragher the role of recorder rather than direct observer, and thus allows for the possibility that what Faragher has been told may not be true or may have an explanation other than the fairies. Faragher writes: 'There are some folks very good for seeing fairies I have not come across myself but very little and I dont want neither to get among them for I think I am too fainthearted'.[14] For Faragher there is still the potential of a threat posed by the fairy. This is an older construction of the fairy, the ambivalent or potentially malignant being which was giving way to a far more child-friendly, safe vision of the fairy and fairy-folk. Faragher's concern about fairies is reflected in some of the material preserved in the notebooks. There was an element of self-interest in dealing with the fairies as people took care not to cross them as they could bring harm to mortals. Faragher recounts the sudden death of a young girl and the question posed by locals as to 'whither it was the fairies that charmed the little girl away or not … the old folks when I was young would have blamed the fairies for all thing of that description'.[15] The fairies were capricious, 'some of them were very mischievous and others very kind.'[16]

This mixed vision of the fairies may partly explain Faragher's comment that 'the fairy days are over and *I don't think many people wish them to come back again*'.[17] (emphasis added).

One fairy figure which did fascinate Faragher, and which he claims to have encountered, was that of the *lhiannan-shee*, a fairy woman dressed in white or yellow silk, who was encountered at night, either alone or in a pair. Talking to her turned her into one's sweetheart, creating a lifelong bond between mortal and fairy woman. When he was a young man, Faragher was once spotted in the company of a *lhiannan-shee*, although he was unaware of her presence. Cresting the top of the Cronk at Glenchass on the way home to Cregneash, some men there stopped to stare at Faragher and his fairy companion. As Faragher recounts: 'I was alone and had no one with me but they all said they saw some person beside me dressed in white but I did not believe them although they all affirmed it was the truth.' Glenchass was 'a likely place for fairies' as it had a 'deep glen and running stream'.[18] Faragher was later to come across a *lhiannan-shee* when coming back from a meeting at the Methodist chapel in Port Erin, though he did not recognise the figure's true identity: 'I met a young lady in a yellow silk dress rustling as she past me by she had a white parasol in her left hand hanging down by her side but neither of us spoke so the people were telling me it was a llananshee and I would have spoken to her she would have followed me.'[19] Despite the dangers of such a fairy woman and knowing well what talking to her would lead to, Faragher returned to the location the following Sunday 'at the same hour intending to speak to her but she was not there'.[20]

The apparent persistent presence of the *lhiannan-shee* is in contrast to the repeated idea that the fairies, and belief in the fairies and the fairy realm, is passing or has already passed. As early as 1897, Faragher noted:

> I think I cannot pick up any more fairies tales as the old people who knew about them are all gone and few of the young ones that believe in fairies but the world is gone to be very unfaithful and there are many that dont believe even the bible in these days people are getting enlightened.[21]

The death of an older generation who believed in fairies, and the rise of a younger generation who – through a combination of education and atheism – had lost faith in both fairy lore and Christianity (and note how orthodox religion and belief in fairies are compatible in Faragher's mind) proved fatal for the traditional culture of fairy belief and folklore.

The following year (1898), Faragher added a note to Roeder at the end of one of the notebooks: 'I send you this book as I am not likely to get anymore fairy yarns … they are only foolish things … yet they may amuse children'.[22] We can see the common move of this period – that so bemoaned by Tolkien – of the fairy tale being relegated to the nursery. For Faragher,

this loss of belief, this 'getting enlightened', is part of a more general coarsening of society. People were 'not so simple as the people used to be but I believe they are more wicked and are not so friendly as the people were in the past'.[23] As evidence of this, Faragher contrasts an incident from his childhood with modern attitudes: 'I remember when I was a boy when the season for setting the potatoes was come the whole of Cregneash … were all helping one another until everyone had their crops down but now no one will help the other and they have to get others to help and pay for it.'[24] The cash nexus had replaced the bonds of mutual obligation. This capitalist infection may also have affected relations between people and the fairy world. Faragher observes: 'I fancy the old farmers wives that used to provide for the fairies were far kinder to the poor than the farmers' wives of our days. Even my own Mother kept a bed for the poor that came our way to lodge then but beggars get very little nowadays.'[25] Charity to the poor mirrored kindness to the fairies. Clean house-water and food was left out at night for the fairies and, as the fairies were cared for, so too in parallel were those mortals 'going on the roads'. The implication is that in the new world in which people were looking for payment for tasks formerly undertaken for free and beggars received little or no charity, the fairies too would be similarly neglected.

If this complaint about capitalism and selfish individualism strikes us as a contemporary observation, then Faragher's suggestion of an environmental explanation for the withdrawal of the fairies also seems very modern. Faragher observes that the disappearance of the fairies is not simply an event happening on the Isle of Man. Rather Faragher states that the fairies were once widespread, '[b]ut it appears they have deserted all the countries round about us as well as our little Island there is a shetland woman living at glenshass and she has great yarns about shetland fairies, it appear the fairies were all over Europe in old times'.[26] It is not just fairies who have abandoned the world of man, but mermaids as well, here connected with fairies: 'I sopose the mermaids and their families are gone to fairy land with the fairies for mermaids and fairies have disappeared'[27] Faragher suggests climate change is the reason for the disappearance of the mermaids: 'Though mairmaids are very seldom seen in our days I have no doubd but such things exist still but may have gone to some fairer clime for this climate has changed in my own days and not like it was when I was a boy there are far more storms and changeable weather and not at all like old times.'[28] As with the explanation for the loss of ghosts, Faragher's climate change argument supposes mermaids and fairies were real and thus their disappearance is the result of concrete actions and events. This is different from the lament for the loss of belief in fairies and fairy lore that we also find in Faragher's notebooks – the disappearance of fairies is connected to the death of a generation who believed in folklore and their replacement by young, educated people who no longer believe. In that model, the fairies and their world only exist when people believe in them. Faragher and his notebooks bear witness to the 'the going out' of Manx fairy lore. Thanks to Roeder, he was given the chance to record some of what he knew of it. Whilst the material he collected, in his own words, 'may amuse children', it now stands as an important record for a largely forgotten world and system of belief. what he knew

of it. Whilst the material he collected, in his own words, 'may amuse children', it now stands as an important record for a largely forgotten world and system of belief.

Stephen Miller

Notes

1. George Broderick, 'Manx Stories and Reminiscences of Ned Beg Hom Ruy', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 38 (1981); 'Manx Stories and Reminiscences of Ned Beg Hom Ruy: Translation and Notes', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 39 (1982). See also Edward Faragher, 'A Sketch of Old Cregneash', in *Skeealyn Æsop*, ed. Charles Roeder (Isle of Mann: S.K. Broadbent, 1901), reproduced in Stephen Miller, '"I Have Written a Little Scitch of My Life." Edward Faragher's "a Sketch of Cregneish"', *Manx Notes* 33 (2004).
2. Three of the notebooks are amongst Roeder's personal papers at Manx National Heritage Library (MNHL), MS09447. The fourth is in Sophia Morrison's personal papers, MNHL, MS09495, Box 5. All quotes from Faragher are verbatim.
3. Anon., 'The Late Mr C. Roeder: A Noted Manchester Antiquary', *Manchester City News*, 16 September 1911; 'Death of Mr Charles Roeder', *Isle of Man Examiner*, 1911. See also Stephen Miller, 'Karl Roeder: An Updated Checklist of Writings on Manx Folklore', *Manx Notes* 16 (2004).
4. Letter from Edward Faragher to Karl Roeder, 14 August 1896, MNHL, MS2146/3 A.
5. Stephen Miller, '"I Often Think of You and but Very Few Beside You." A Checklist of Letters from Edward Faragher to Karl Roeder', *Manx Notes* 96 (2007). See also 'Fairy Legends from the Isle of Man (6) Edward Faragher's Letters to Karl Roeder', *Manx Notes* 492 (2020).
6. 'Introduction', in *Ghosts, Bugganes & Fairy Pigs: Karl Roeder's Manx Notes & Queries (1904)* (Isle of Mann: Culture Vannin, 2019).
7. William Cashen, *William Cashen's Manx Folk-Lore*, ed. Sophia Morrison (Isle of Mann: Manx Language Society, 1912), vii.
8. Notebook compiled by Edward Faragher (1898), [43], MNHL, MS09495, Sophia Morrison Papers, Box 5.
9. Notebook compiled by Edward Faragher (1898), [4]–[5], MNHL, MS09495, Sophia Morrison Papers, Box 5.
10. Letter from Edward Faragher to Karl Roeder, 18 April 1897, MNHL, MS09447, Karl Roeder Papers.
11. Notebook compiled by Edward Faragher for Karl Roeder (1897), [57], MNHL, MS09447, Karl Roeder Papers.
12. Notebook compiled by Edward Faragher (1898), [7], MNHL, MS09495, Sophia Morrison Papers, Box 5.
13. Notebook compiled by Edward Faragher (1898), [28], MNHL, MS09495, Sophia Morrison Papers, Box 5.
14. Notebook compiled by Edward Faragher for Karl Roeder (1897), [57], MNHL, MS09447, Karl Roeder Papers.
15. Notebook compiled by Edward Faragher for Karl Roeder (1897), [60]–[61], MNHL, MS09447, Karl Roeder Papers.
16. Notebook compiled by Edward Faragher for Karl Roeder (1897), [13], MNHL, MS09447, Karl Roeder Papers.
17. Notebook compiled by Edward Faragher (1898), [79], MNHL, MS09495, Sophia Morrison Papers, Box 5.
18. Notebook compiled by Edward Faragher for Karl Roeder (1897), [14]–[15], MNHL, MS09447, Karl Roeder Papers.
19. Letter from Edward Faragher to Karl Roeder, 20 July 1896, MNHL, MS1246/1 A.
20. Letter from Edward Faragher to Karl Roeder, 20 July 1896, MNHL, MS1246/1 A.
21. Notebook compiled by Edward Faragher for Karl Roeder (1897), [61], (MNHL) MS 09447, Karl Roeder Papers.
22. Notebook compiled by Edward Faragher (1898), [113]–[114], MNHL, MS09495, Sophia Morrison Papers, Box 5.
23. Notebook compiled by Edward Faragher for Karl Roeder (1897), [62], MNHL, MS09447, Karl Roeder Papers.
24. Notebook compiled by Edward Faragher for Karl Roeder (1897), [62], MNHL, MS09447, Karl Roeder Papers.
25. Notebook compiled by Edward Faragher for Karl Roeder (1897), [62]–[63], MNHL, MS09447, Karl Roeder Papers.
26. Notebook compiled by Edward Faragher for Karl Roeder (1897), [13], MNHL, MS09447, Karl Roeder Papers.
27. Notebook compiled by Edward Faragher (1901), [68], MNHL, MS09447, Karl Roeder Papers.
28. Notebook compiled by Edward Faragher (1898), [13], MNHL, MS09495, Sophia Morrison Papers, Box 5.